

## *On the Rigorous Writing of Evil in Beckett and Sade*

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This article aims to trace the echo of Sade in Beckett's dealing with evil in *Watt* and *The Unnamable*. Mediated by translation and editorial projects, Beckett's longstanding interest in Sade peaked in the postwar years, nurtured by his interest in the Sadean readings of Bataille and Blanchot, where the shade of the Holocaust looms large. The rigorous, almost implacable shape of Beckett's novels and novellas found in Sade's inquiry into evil a catalyst for the reconfiguration of language as vagrancy (the novellas), paralysis (*Watt*) or disintegration (*The Unnamable*). Confronted with Sade's ruthless and numbing narratives, Beckett's writing of evil will find in the voice a new organizing principle, profoundly indebted to his first experiments with the new media.

**Keywords:** Beckett, Sade, evil, language, voice

In his post-*Trilogy* interview with Israel Shenker (1956), Beckett famously expressed<sup>1</sup> the fear of having reached a point of "disintegration" in his work. This aesthetic standstill is also the result of an intense dialogue with the writings of Sade, for whom disintegration is the ultimate epiphany of evil. Taking the cue from this issue, this article aims to trace the echo of Sade in Beckett's dealing with evil in *Watt* and *The Unnamable*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "In the last book, *L'Innomable*, there's complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on". Beckett to Israel Shenker, *New York Times*, 5 May 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Critical attention has particularly focused on a programmatically Sadean novel such as *How It Is* (1964); this article will investigate Beckett's intertextual dialogue with Sade in less explored texts such as *Watt* and *The Unnamable*. Dates of composition always refer to the English version of Beckett's texts, even when these are preceded by a French version.

Beckett's dialogue with the writings of Sade spans over forty years. The first mention appears in a letter to Thomas MacGreevy on 8 September 1934 dealing with the paintings of Cézanne; Beckett is fascinated by the absence of human agency in the views of Mont Ste. Victoire. In his opinion, Cézanne finds "landscape to be something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms" (Beckett 2009a, 223). He then directly challenges Sade: "Could there be any [...] irritation more *mièvre* than that of Sade at the impossibilité d'outrager la nature"<sup>3</sup> (Beckett 2009, 223). The term "*mièvre*", employed by Beckett to "suggest something soft and effeminate" (Rabaté 2020, 2), is quoted from Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1930), which he had read in the original taking extensive notes, as testified by his *Dream Notebook* (Beckett 1999). Beckett shares Praz's interpretation of Sade as a writer affecting Decadent Western literature for two centuries, from neo-Gothic Romanticism to late Symbolism. This view is aligned with Beckett's strong attack on contemporary artists, still indebted to an anthropomorphic idea of nature. Beckett's sarcastic remarks depict Sade as a writer frustrated by the impossibility of reproducing nature's destructive agency. At that time, however, Beckett's knowledge of Sade was still quite superficial; this changed in 1938, when he was asked by Jack Kahane, director of the Obelisk Press, to translate *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

In the course of his deep engagement in the translation, Beckett expanded his view of Sade well beyond his reading of Praz, with an understanding that will last for the rest of his life: "The obscenity of surface is indescribable. Nothing could be less pornographical. It fills me with a kind of metaphysical ecstasy. The composition is extraordinary, as rigorous as Dante's... [...] The dispassionate statement of 600 'passions' is Puritan [...]" (Beckett 2009a, 607)<sup>4</sup>. Here two issues emerge: for Beckett, Sade tries to convey a dark metaphysics and a disenchanted epistemology through a rigorous, almost implacable, "Puritan" form<sup>5</sup>. In some ways this is an image of Beckett's own strategy, and it is no surprise that he confessed, some forty years later,

<sup>3</sup> In his letters Beckett often alternates French and English. There's no question mark in the original.

<sup>4</sup> Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 21 February 1938. Emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> The letter also testifies Beckett's unceasing interest in Dante.

that at that point of his life he was part of "Sade's boom"<sup>6</sup>. Starting from Apollinaire's groundbreaking study *L'Oeuvre du Marquis de Sade* (1909), French Surrealists considered Sade their precursor. Among French intellectuals such interest did not wane in the following years. Among others Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Maurice Heine, Simone de Beauvoir read in the scandalous writer an advocate of freedom against censorship, an innovator of language, a post-Nietzschean thinker. Beckett had an intense dialogue with them.

Although he ultimately decided to turn down his translation of *The 120 Days*<sup>7</sup>, immediately after the War he planned a special 'Sade issue' of the journal *Transition* together with Georges Duthuit. The volume was never printed, but the preliminary materials have been recently rediscovered and partially published in a special issue of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* (31.1, 2022). From Beckett's intense correspondence with Duthuit on the subject in late 1950, we know that he "started to read, compile, and translate selected French language texts" related to Sade (Krimper 2022): he translated four letters by Sade, reviewed a translation of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), and provided translated excerpts of the seminal studies<sup>8</sup> by Georges Bataille's *Vice is Perhaps the Heart of Man*<sup>9</sup> and Maurice Blanchot's *Sade and the Sovereign Man*<sup>10</sup>. Bataille's<sup>11</sup> and Blanchot's<sup>12</sup> argument that Sade's work foresees the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust reverberates in Beckett's postwar fiction. Sade seldom speaks of evil; he rather talks of "vice", "crime" or "God":

6 Beckett to George Reavey, 24 August 1972.

7 Beckett probably did not want to be associated with a publisher which promoted, together with provocative writers such as Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin, explicitly pornographic literature.

8 Beckett also included in the dossier his translations of Pierre Klossowski's *Sade mon prochain* (1947), Maurice Heine's introduction to the *Dialogue entre un prêtre et un moribond* (1930) and *Le Marquis de Sade et le roman noir* (1933).

9 His Preface to *Justine ou les Malheurs de la Vertu* (1950).

10 An excerpt from *Lautréamont et Sade* (1949).

11 Beckett took extensive notes on Bataille's Sade while working on his *Textes pour rien* (completed in 1951, first published in 1955).

12 Beckett considered *Lautréamont et Sade* an excellent study: "There are some very good things in it" (letter to Georges Duthuit, December 1950, precise date unclear).

By a divine will that defies comprehension, virtue was bound to yield to the machinations of the wicked. (Sade 2012, 67).

The meticulous performance of Sade's tormentors hides the notion of evil, which finds substitutes in a Godot-like absent or malignant God, as well as in crimes perfectly attuned to the Law of Nature:

'But the man you describe is a monster.'

'The man I describe is Nature's own.'

'He is a wild beast.'

'Well, is not the tiger or leopard of which this man is the image, if you like, created like him by Nature and created to fulfil the intentions of Nature? The wolf that devours the lamb accomplishes the will of our common mother, like the wrongdoer who destroys the object of his vengeance or of his lubricity'<sup>13</sup>. (Sade 2012, 142-43)

The laws of an alien, indifferent Nature are the only governing principles of Sade's fiction; absolute annihilation is its ultimate, though unattainable, goal. Such perspective acquired new resonances after the Holocaust, finding an echo in Beckett's translation of Bataille. Having read the report of a survivor, Bataille was the first to trace the conflation of language, violence, and silence in Sade. He tried to imagine the same relation with the persecutor, and he could not refrain from laughing at the switch between victim and tormentor; the words sounded improbable and far-fetched. Victim and executioner share the same linguistic impotence: one must speak the unspeakable, the other embodies the cold logic of power, and does not need to speak at all: he "speaks the language of the State. And if he is swayed by passion, the silence in which he delights affords him a more secret pleasure"<sup>14</sup> (Bataille 2022, 53). The executioner can rely on the hypocrisy of public silence and the private enjoyment of violence. But Sade's writing goes in the opposite direction. His fiction, faced with the task of portraying both the absolute solitude of man and the absolute denial of the victim, is necessarily committed to silence: "it is true that plenary violence, which nothing can arrest, implies this entire negation of the victim. *But this negation is contrary to the fact of*

<sup>13</sup> Particularly fascinated by the word, Beckett employed "lubricity" both in his *Proust* (1930) and in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932).

<sup>14</sup> All excerpts from Bataille and Blanchot are provided in Beckett's translation.

*language*<sup>15</sup> (Bataille 2022, 54). Hovering on the limits of language, Sade tends towards the inhuman: “Sade’s language must be defined as one repudiating the relationship between him who speaks and those to whom he speaks, repudiating, that is, language itself, which is essentially that relationship” (Bataille 2022, 55). Thanks to Beckett’s translations of Bataille and Sade, such scenario will find its way into Beckett’s postwar fiction, but also in his nonfiction.

After the ‘German Letter’ of 1937<sup>16</sup> (Beckett 2009, 516-21), Sade’s system of evil reappears in Beckett’s meditations on the painting of Bram Van Velde (1946), “the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act” (Beckett 2001, 143). Incarnated in the paradox of the necessity and the impossibility of expression, evil becomes for Beckett a formal and ethical problem. In the aftermath of War, the word ‘evil’ is consistent with Beckett’s vocabulary of lacuna and reticence. This strategy is employed in *The Capital of the Ruins* (1946)<sup>17</sup>, the only war script Beckett ever wrote. In the description of the city of Saint-Lô, “bombed out of existence in one night” (Beckett 1995, 277), the radical evil<sup>18</sup> of the Shoah is never mentioned (the term “war” itself is mentioned only once, in relation to “German prisoners of war”) (277). Beckett describes with meticulous accuracy the Irish Hospital, its organization, structure and equipment, but, as in Sade’s enclosed spaces, nature is excluded from the scene<sup>19</sup>. Human bonds undergo a similar treatment: local inhabitants have no chance of recovering social links; the problem is “so arduous and elusive that it literally ceased to be formulable” (277)<sup>20</sup>.

Beckett’s final reference to the survivors from the Saint-Lô massacre sounds like a programme for his future writing:

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<sup>15</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937.

<sup>17</sup> Commissioned to Beckett by the Irish radio, it was meant as a report of the Irish Red Cross activities in the Norman city of Saint-Lô. Is probably was never broadcast.

<sup>18</sup> The notion of ‘radical evil’ was notoriously the crux of Hannah Arendt’s thought.

<sup>19</sup> The only exception is the “grass slope” now covered by the hospital.

<sup>20</sup> Beckett’s considerations clearly evoke Agamben’s meditations on the “un-sayability of Auschwitz” (Agamben 2012, 157).

I mean the possibility that some of those who were in Saint-Lô will come home realizing that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and a sense of a time-honoured conception of *humanity in ruins*, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again. (Beckett 1995, 278)<sup>21</sup>

Beckett's postwar fiction (namely his short stories, *Texts for Nothing* and *Watt*) portrays this "humanity in ruins". Evil is expressed by means of permanent homelessness: Beckett's tramps or survivors are exiled from their original dwelling, and forced to roam across uncharted territories, cathedrals in ruins, fields, hospitals:

I would have done better to spend the night in the cathedral, on the mat before the altar, I would have continued on my way at first light, or they would have found me stretched out in the rigor of death, the genuine bodily article, under the blue eyes fount of so much hope, and put me in the evening papers. (Beckett 1995b, 70)<sup>22</sup>

These nomadic characters share some features with Sade's Justine, an innocent character travelling from town to town and village to village only to find new forms of evil, as shown in the following passage: "One day Madame Desroches came to tell me that she had finally found a household where I would be warmly welcomed, as long as I behaved myself well" (Sade 2012, 21). The fate of Beckett's and Sade's characters is inscrutable: being born appears to be their only sin (the reference to Nietzsche is obvious, as in *Waiting for Godot*)<sup>23</sup>. To Sade's dungeons, prisons and castles Beckett replies with a sequence of shelters, abodes, sheds:

What he called his cabin in the mountains was a sort of wooden shed. The door had been removed, for firewood, or for some other purpose. The glass had disappeared from the window. The roof had fallen in at several places. The interior was divided, by the remains of a partition, into two unequal parts. If there had been a furniture it was gone. The vilest acts had been committed on the ground and against the walls. (Beckett 1995c, 89)

These ruins bear traces of "the vilest acts" of a humanity in ruins.

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<sup>21</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>22</sup> Beckett, *The Calmative*.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular the Satyr's 'wisdom' about the curse of being born in *The Death of Tragedy*.

### *Watt. The Issue of Language*

The breakdown of humanity is a scenario exploited by both authors to challenge the flaws of rationalism. Beckett's contemporaries saw in Sade a forerunner of Adorno's and Horkheimer's defiance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. While Kant devised a perfect epistemological system where Reason had to conform only to its own laws, Beckett's *Watt* is built as a perfect epistemological machine doomed to derail. It is the question raised by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*, written in the same years (1944-47). They argue that Sade's libertinism is an enlightenment project with a vengeance: it liberates individuals from taboos, the oppression of the law and religion, but it turns pure reason into a pleasure principle (*Justine*) or death drive (*The 120 Days of Sodom*). As in the world of Sade, dominated by systems and order, Europe in ruins was a clear indictment of the inhumanity of this "rationalistic absolutism".

The precisely coordinated modern sporting squad, in which no member is in doubt over his role and replacement is ready for each, has its exact counterpart in the sexual teams of Juliette, in which no moment is unused, no body orifice neglected, no function left inactive. [...] The special architeconic structure of the Kantian system, like the gymnasts' pyramids in Sade's orgies and the formalized principles of early bourgeois freemasonry [...] prefigures the organization, devoid of any substantial goals, which was to encompass the whole of life. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 69)

The statement is consistent with Beckett's perfect theatrical machinery, from *Footfalls* (1975) to *Quad* (1981), which will stage Watt's sharp and relentless calculations equating human bodies to lines and planes. This negative epistemology<sup>24</sup> can also be interpreted as negative theology. In Sade's Castle of Silling God can be nominated only to be cursed; "The name of God shall only be pronounced accompanied by insults and curses and shall be repeated as often as possible"

<sup>24</sup> Watt shares with *The 120 Days of Sodom* several thematic affinities: the journey, the closed spaces, the master-slave relationship. However, the formal similarities are even more significant, and reinforce the Kant-Sade-Beckett triangulation. The two novels share a digressive structure, characterized by intratextual elements (digressions and comments), metanarrative insertions (notes by the author, asides, asterisks) and paratextual elements (the *Addenda*).

(Sade 2016, 54). Mr Knott's household is equally dark and mysterious. But Knott, invisible and unknowable, embodies a sadistic God, an absent centre for Watt's perceptions which in fact disintegrate:

Not that for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play, in this particular instance, or even perceived the forms that they upheaved, or obtained the least useful information concerning himself, or Mr Knott, for he did not. But he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for a head. Little by little, and not without labour. (Beckett 2009b, 99)

Epistemological failure leads to partially divergent outcomes in the two novels, but some striking similarities are retained. Watt's inability to understand Knott entails a perceptive and linguistic paralysis; the servant's final vicissitudes are embedded in ataraxy and aphasia: he needs a witness to translate his disturbed language for the reader. In turn, Sade's persecutors, looking forward to utter indifference, need to erase all traces of affection or sensitivity, as shown by Madame Duclos: "My goodbyes were soon said: my heart had no regrets, for it did not know the art of forming attachments" (Sade 2016, 176). Paralysis and indifference are transferred to the novels' configuration of space. A natural setting is almost never mentioned in either novel: the bleak, enclosed spaces of the castle and of the house bear no sign of rebirth and regeneration. Watt's vision of Knott in the garden leads to the servant's paralysis of language and perception<sup>25</sup>. Mr Knott reveals himself only to create distraction. The two most striking similarities between *Watt* and the *120 Days of Sodom* are located in passages holding a satirical inversion of Rousseau's natural utopias. In the last part of Beckett's novel Watt finds himself in an asylum akin to a death camp. Here he meets Sam, who recalls the story of their shocking pastime in the institution's fenced lawns. Their violence is first directed at birds:

Birds of every kind abounded, and these it was our delight to pursue, with stones and clods of earth. Robins, in particular, thanks to their confidingness, we destroyed in great numbers. And lark's nests, laden with eggs still warm from the mother's breast, we ground into fragments, under our feet, with peculiar satisfaction, at the appropriate season of the year. (Beckett 2009b, 132)

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<sup>25</sup> Watt speaks inverting the words in the sentences, or the sentences in the paragraphs.

Then at the rats:

But our particular friends were the rats, that dwelt by the stream. They were long and black. We brought them such titbits from our ordinary as rinds of cheese, and morsels of gristle, and we brought them also bird's eggs, and frogs, and fledgelings. Sensible of these attentions, they would come flocking round us at our approach, with every sign of confidence and affection, and glide up our trouserlegs, and hang upon our breasts. And then we would sit down in the midst of them, and give them to eat, out of our hands, of a nice fat frog, or a baby thrush. Or seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative. It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God. (Beckett 2009b, 132-33)

The passage is clearly tied to Sade's Addenda to the *120 Days of Sodom*, the first of the *Supplementary Tortures* in the novel:

By means of a pipe, they introduce a mouse into her cunt; the pipe is withdrawn, they sew up the cunt, and the animal, unable to escape, devours her intestines. They make her swallow a serpent which will in turn devour her. (Sade 2016, 397)

References to cannibalism (sometimes expressed in the desecration of the holy wafer) are not infrequent in both novels. In these passages a self-predatory attitude is transferred from language to creation: rats eat their offspring in Beckett; in Sade they devour the female womb. Creation enacts a cycle of destruction where natural evil is the manifestation of God. The actions of these characters constitute, as stated by Blanchot, "a negation which is realized on a multitudinous scale, which no particular case is able to satisfy, [...] essentially destined to transcend the plane of human existence" (Blanchot, 2022, 48). The garden of Eden is turned into an annihilating machine, humankind into bare life<sup>26</sup>. In this rigorous aesthetics of the negative the target is a debased creation where the author himself is a disturbing agent. For the author of *The 120 Days* the creative act is always criminal, writing itself is an infection. In *Watt* writing holds the traces of an obscure historical catastrophe.

<sup>26</sup> To the concept of "bare life" Giorgio Agamben devotes his *Homo Sacer* (see Agamben 1995).

The 18th century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de la Raison*. I've never understood that; they're all mad, *ils sont tous fous, ils déraisonnent!* They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak. The Encylopedists want to know everything. [...] But that direct relation between the self and – as the Italians say – *lo scibile*, the knowable, was already broken. (Beckett to M. Haerdter, quoted in Fehsenfeld and McMillan 231)

The works Beckett completed in the Sixties will retain the orderly form and implacable logic of the *120 Days*, but Sade's illusion of a united, almost Nietzschean selfhood (the "Unique One" of Blanchot) capable of exerting absolute domination over his characters and his narratives, is doomed to fail. Beckett's Sadean fictions and plays, from *The Unnamable* (1959) to *What Where* (1983), incorporate the theme of evil into an odyssey of disembodied voices.

### *The Unnamable. The Disintegration of Language*

Beckett's experiments with drama arise from the speaking voice of *The Unnamable* (1959). In the novel the word "evil" (a term which, as with Sade, seldom appears in Beckett's corpus) refers to the obscure origin of his condition:

What puzzles me is the thought of being indebted for this information to persons with whom I can never have been in contact. Can it be innate knowledge? Like that of good and evil. This seems improbable to me. (Beckett 2010, 8)

Information about his whereabouts, the dim light surrounding him, the stories he is forced to utter, may come from other voices, his "delegates" (Beckett 2010, 7) talking about his mother, or God: "They told me I depended on him, in the last analysis" (Beckett 2010, 9). According to Elsa Baroghel:

The theme of evil may be said to encapsulate the tension between the gnostic view of the world as a conflict between light and dark, or good and evil, and the occasionalist<sup>27</sup> concept of pre-established harmony, according to which 'evil' is a constitutive limitation of the human condition – a limitation re-

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<sup>27</sup> Beckett took extensive notes on Occasionalist philosophy, showing a specific interest in the work of Geulincx, Berkley and Leibniz. See Feldman 2006.

garded as being of divine origin and which, therefore, operates a reversal of 'evil' into 'good' – or, rather, 'perfect'. (Baroghel 2018, 293)

*The Unnamable* deconstructs both Predestination and Free Will through the disruption of character (he has no human body), story, space. The protagonist operates in an infernal space implicitly alluding to Satan's Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost*: "I am Matthew and I am the angel, I who came before the cross, before the sinning, came into the world, came here" (Beckett 2010, 11). Both narrator and protagonist sometimes feel "an existential void" when left to their "own devices without any divine supervision. If God exists, he does not care about human existence or fate and is indifferent to human chagrin". (Jęczmińska 2020, 40). On other occasions the Unnamable occupies, Sun-like, a central position, with other characters (Mahood, Worm) and other voices orbiting around him. Or he feels, as a fallen God (Orpheus or Dionysus) his body dismembered and dispersed in the four corners of the world<sup>28</sup>. In many respects the narrative retains Sadean features: a character without sex, arms and legs, whose existence is only testified by physical sensations (the feeling of tears trickling down his cheeks), the Unnamable could represent Sade's final dystopia. This half-human figure also recalls the presence of a master (the narrator, or Beckett himself) who directs or creates the voices he hears:

The master in any case, we don't intend, listen to them hedging, we don't intend, unless absolutely driven to it, to make the mistake of inquiring into him, he'd turn out to be a mere high official, we'd end up by needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still certain depths we prefer not to sink to. (Beckett 2010, 91)

The undefined identity of Beckett's character matches Sadean descriptive strategies, as the description of Durcet in the *120 Days*:

Durcet is 53 years of age: he is small, short, fat, very stocky, with a pleasant and fresh face, very fair skin, his whole body and particularly his hips and buttocks exactly like a woman's, his arse is fresh, fleshy, firm and plump, but gapes excessively from habitual sodomy, his prick is extraordinarily small,

<sup>28</sup> An adaption of John Donne's Holy Sonnet *At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow.*

barely 2 inches around by 4 inches long; he absolutely never gets hard any more, his climaxes are rare and very painful, far from plentiful and always preceded by spasms which throw him into a kind of frenzy that drives him to crime [...] (Sade 2016, 20)

This passage can be compared to Beckett's ironic description of the Unnamable's identity:

But my dear man, come be reasonable, look at this photograph, what, you see nothing, true for you, no matter, here, look at this death's-head, you'll see. You'll be all right, it won't last long, here, look, here's the record, insults to policemen, indecent exposure, sins against holy ghost, contempt of court, impertinence to superiors, impudence to inferiors, deviations from reason, without battery, it's nothing, you'll be all right, you'll see, I beg your pardon, does he work, good God no, out of question, look, here's the medical report, spasmodic tabes, painless ulcers, I repeat, painless, all is painless, multiple softening, manifold hardenings, insensitive to blows, sight failing, chronic gripes, light diet, shit well tolerated, hearing failing, heart irregular, sweet-tempered, smell failing, heavy sleeper, no erections, would you like some more [...] (Beckett 2010, 93-94)

Durcet's description is repeated, with slight variations, forty pages later (Sade 2016, 61). As in *The Unnamable*, the character's ambiguous sexual identity, his physical impairments and moral flaws are reinforced in the new narrative. The task of replacing the agency of God and the regulating action of nature is doomed to failure. Sade and Becket fill their novels with metanarrative insertions: plans, cast descriptions, lists and rules which reinforce the text's inadequacy. This is explicitly mentioned in Sade's notes, which state:

Notes.

Do not deviate in the slightest from this plan, everything within it has been worked out several times and with the greatest precision.

Describe the departure. And throughout add above all some moral instruction to the suppers.

When you come to copy it all out have a notebook, in which you will place the names of all the principal characters and all those who play an important role, such as those with numerous passions and those of whom you have spoken several times, like the one of Hell; leave a large margin by their names and fill this margin with everyone you find who resembles them as you make your copy – this note is utterly essential and it is the only way you will be able to see your work clearly and avoid repetitions. (Sade 2016, 396)

Similarly, in Beckett's novel one can find:

But this question of lights deserves to be treated in a section apart, it is so intriguing, and at length, composedly, and so it will be, at the first opportunity, when time is not so short, and the mind more composed. Resolution number twenty-three. And in the meantime the conclusion to be drawn? That the only noises Worm has had till now are those of mouths? Correct. (Beckett 2010, 70)

The final "correct" in the text stands for a tentative confirmation of the conclusion as well as an injunction to amend the written text. These narrators dream of a perfectly ordered world, but they cannot avoid deviations and rewritings. Evil to them is primarily a linguistic fall into the materiality and contingency of language. However, these are not only narratives of evil, but also 'evil narratives', where saying is always 'ill saying'. The logical protocols which have dominated Western culture since the Enlightenment have been touched by evil; as a consequence, writing, with its organising codes, has become akin to violence and torture. In order to achieve the disintegration of language, Sade and Beckett must come to terms with the disturbing presence of a voice.

### *The Swerve to the Voice*

Sade's ultimate dream lies in the testimony of absolute destruction of humankind, to whom writing inflicts the last torture. Yet, storytelling is also the apex of pleasure for Sade's masters, as the narrator of *The 120 Days of Sodom* indicates:

It is accepted among true libertines that the sensations communicated by the organ of hearing excite more than any others and produce the most vivid impressions. (Sade 2016, 28)<sup>29</sup>

The most precious vice, therefore, is the pleasure of listening to stories, to other voices. *The Unnamable* also finds in the fleeting texture of the voice a persistent preoccupation. The origin and status of the voice is his main concern:

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29 Passions must be "described to them in order and in the greatest detail" (Sade 2016, 28).

May one speak of a voice, in these conditions? Probably not. And yet I do. The fact is all this business about voices requires to be revised, corrected and then abandoned. (Beckett 2010, 49)

Disembodied and yet forced to utter<sup>30</sup>, Beckett's voice must speak of things of which the author himself cannot speak. A ghostly voice is the great theme of *The Unnamable*: the search for a voice torn between "the self that 'utters' and the 'not I'" (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 611). Faltering and barely audible, the voice must continue to utter while trying to stop uttering. After Beckett's engagement with the new media, the voice is the veritable protagonist of his last phase: as is true in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the main character of *The Unnamable* vibrates like a tympanum. In the late works other characters will embody a panting breath in the mud, such as Pim in *How It Is*<sup>31</sup> (1964), a novel explicitly built around "sadism pure and simple" (Beckett 2009, 54). Or the eyelid of *Il See Ill Said* (1981), where the devouring gaze of the observer is forced to tears by the impossibility of retaining the image. Reconfiguring *King Lear*'s "vile jelly"<sup>32</sup> (Beckett 1986, 73), the eye turns into the source of all evil: "And from it as from an evil core [...] the evil spread" (Beckett 1986, 5). Beckett radicalizes Sade's inquiry into evil through the invention of shades perpetually in ruin, whose voices rely on lacunae and oblivion, and just because of this can survive. From this perspective Beckett's postwar writing is at the same time a writing of evil (as in Sade) and an evil writing<sup>33</sup>, the transgression of Adorno's imperative to cease<sup>34</sup>, in "the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence" (Beckett 2010, 69).

30 The other emerging from the fracture of the self is immediately rejected, but it is this fracture that "becomes the substance of testimony" (Anderton 2016, 77). All the prosthetic voices that inhabit *The Unnamable*, his "puppets", attest of his residual subjectivity.

31 *How It Is*, with Pim's 'education', is probably the clearest example of Sadean fantasy in Beckett.

32 Beckett is obviously quoting Cornwall's eye-gouging of Gloucester in *King Lear*, III.vii.100.

33 A further example of Beckett's 'evil writing' (and of his dialogue with Shakespeare) is *Worstward Ho* (1981).

34 The reference is to Adorno's considerations on poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno devoted to Beckett several writings. As shown by Shane Weller (Weller, 2010), he also left notes on *The Unnamable*.

The question remains whether silence ushers in a disowning of language altogether or rather provides a necessary function in Beckett's final shift towards the music of poetry.

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